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Before the Conatus Doctrine: Spinoza's Correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh

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Abstract: Scholars recognize Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine as one of the most important features of the *Ethics*. In this paper, I investigate two rather neglected aspects of this doctrine, namely, the notion of “transition of perfection” and its moral consequences. I argue that both aspects originate from significant changes in Spinoza's thought from the positions held in his early writings. To support this claim, I focus on how Spinoza discusses these points in his correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh (1664–1665). In his letters, Spinoza denies the reality of transitions of perfection, while such transitions will become a key feature of his later account of affects. Moreover, Spinoza subscribes to a kind of ethical intellectualism that he later rejects in his mature version of the *Ethics*. I conclude that the *first draft* of the *Ethics* mentioned in 1665 to van Blijenbergh must have been rather different from its definitive version.

Even if I were once to find untrue the fruits which I have gathered from my natural understanding, they would still make me happy; for I enjoy them, and seek to pass my life not in sorrowing and sighing, but in peace, joy and cheerfulness, and so I ascend a step higher. Spinoza to van Blijenbergh, Letter 21.

1 Introduction – The Difficulties of Becoming Spinoza

In recent decades, scholars have rightly considered the *conatus* doctrine the core of Spinoza's mature thought.¹ Scholars agree that one of the major features of

¹ I will call “*conatus* principle” the mere statement that things strive to preserve their own being. Instead, I will call “*conatus* doctrine” the way in which Spinoza articulates the *conatus* principle

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Spinoza's *Ethics* is a particular conception of the nature of finite things, which are there considered not only as modifications of an infinite and unique substance, but also as endowed with active powers to operate in the world.² From a systematic point of view, the current debate on the *conatus* doctrine has focused mostly on two issues, namely, how Spinoza derives E3p6–7³ and whether his doctrine contradicts the anti-teleological statements put forward in the Appendix to the first part.⁴ Moreover, from a historical point of view, scholars have often assumed that Spinoza consistently held the same *conatus* doctrine from his first systematic work, the *Short Treatise* (ca. 1661), to the later version of the *Ethics* (1675). As Piet Steenbakkers put it, “the same concept of *conatus* and an early version of the theory of the human passions both already occur in the *Short Treatise*”.⁵

In what follows, I examine the correspondence that took place between Spinoza and Willem van Blijenbergh (Ep18–24 and 27) in 1665. Here, Spinoza discusses two issues that are central to the *conatus* doctrine as it is presented in the *Ethics*, namely, the transitions that things can undergo between different degrees of perfection and the extent to which adequate knowledge is sufficient to oppose passions by bringing human beings to beatitude. In Ep23 Spinoza tells van Blijenbergh about the *first draft* of the *Ethics* that he was writing at the time. Jarig Jelles, Spinoza's intimate friend and author of the *Preface* to the *Opera Posthuma* (in which the correspondence was originally published in 1677), was the first to

in the later version of the *Ethics*, which includes the *conatus* principle (E3p6–7) but also provides extensive developments on it (E3–5). The main abbreviations are the following: Def = *Definition*, Dem = *Demonstration*, Expl = *Explanation*, P = *Proposition*, Pref = *Preface*, and S = *Scholium*. In quoting Spinoza's texts, I first provide the page number of the English translation. All the translations from Spinoza's early writings are taken from Spinoza 2002; quotes from the *Ethics* are taken from Spinoza 1994. References to the original text of Spinoza's *Short Treatise* are given with the page number of the new critical edition provided by Spinoza 2009. The abbreviations used for Spinoza's works are listed at the end before the bibliography. For the works not abbreviated, I refer to Gebhardt's edition (Spinoza 1925), quoted as “G” followed by the Roman numeral for the volume and Arabic numeral for the page.

2 See, for instance, Matheron 1969 and 1991, Garrett 2002, Lin 2004, Jaquet 2005, Sévéric 2005, Busse 2009, Laerke 2009, and Viljanen 2011.

3 According to Matheron 1969, 10 f. and Allison 1987, 131–133, Spinoza derived E3p6 from E3p4–5. Lin 2004 and Viljanen 2011 have contended that E1p25 and E1p34 must be taken into account as well. Garrett 2002 has provided a detailed discussion of the flaws that Bennett 1984, 231–251 and Della Rocca 1996, 194–206, ascribed to Spinoza's *conatus* argument presented in E3p4–6.

4 Bennett 1984, 122–144, Carriero 2005 and McDonough 2011 have supported an anti-teleological reading of Spinoza's notion of *conatus* and appetite, while Garrett 1999 and 2002 and Lin 2004 have contended that Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine entails a form of teleology. Viljanen 2011, 105–125 has provided a fuller reconstruction of this debate.

5 Steenbakkers 2009, 31.

quote Spinoza's exchange with van Blijenbergh as a clarification of Spinoza's central claim that God determines everything to act and operate in a certain way (E1p26–29).⁶ Important contemporary scholars such as Gilles Deleuze have followed Jelles in considering Spinoza's replies to van Blijenbergh as elucidations of the *conatus* doctrine exposed in the later version of the *Ethics*.⁷

In this paper, I propose a different reading. Despite the continuity that links Spinoza's early career with his later achievements, I would like to stress the differences between these two stages of his thought. I contend that the correspondence with van Blijenbergh provides insight that highlights the changes that Spinoza's thought underwent. Filippo Mignini has been one of the first to draw attention to the evolution of Spinoza's philosophy by establishing the most plausible chronology of his early writings.⁸ Recently, Emanuela Scribano has stressed the difference between Spinoza's *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics* concerning the relationship between judgment and desire.⁹ While in KV2, 16, Spinoza holds that desire presupposes judgment concerning good and evil, in E3p9s he states the contrary. Scribano has explained this change by arguing that Spinoza introduced and made use of the *conatus* principle in the *Short Treatise* (KV1, 5) in a very different way from how he used it subsequently in *Ethics*. In the following, I provide further evidence for this reading by extending this claim to the *first draft* of Spinoza's *Ethics* mentioned to van Blijenbergh in Ep23.

A closer examination of the correspondence with van Blijenbergh reveals that in 1665 Spinoza dismissed the notion of “transition” of perfection that will be at the core of the later version of his *conatus* doctrine and will serve to define the nature of human affects in the *Ethics*. Moreover, I show that in 1665 Spinoza endorsed a kind of ethical intellectualism that failed to explain the power with which passions and imagination oppose adequate knowledge. By drawing attention to the difficulties that Spinoza faced in 1665, the examination of his correspondence with van Blijenbergh uncovers traces of an evolution in Spinoza's thought. Moreover, such an inquiry allows us to appreciate aspects of the *conatus* doctrine too often neglected, such as the notion of transition of perfection and its moral consequences.

⁶ See Jelles' *Preface*, § 18, in Akkerman/Hubbeling 1979.

⁷ Deleuze 1967, 226–233, (followed by Beltran 2008) has explained Spinoza's account of *good* and *evil* in terms of favorable or detrimental compositions between the *conatus* and external causes. However, I will argue that at the time in which Spinoza replied to van Blijenbergh he was far from having established his *conatus* doctrine as it appears in the *Ethics*, and thus we cannot interpret his answers using such a doctrine.

⁸ See Mignini 1987.

⁹ See Scribano 2012.

I present in turn the two lines of objection pointed out by van Blijenbergh. The first line (§ 2) concerns the nature of essences and the variations of perfection. In 1665, Spinoza was forced to deny any reality of such variations by reducing them to mere negations. The second line (§ 3) focuses on Spinoza's ethical intellectualism and his interpretation of Holy Scripture. Here, Spinoza's claim, according to which adequate knowledge is sufficient to emend imagination, seems to be denied by the force with which imagination somehow resists adequate knowledge in the case provided by Adam and the prophets. I conclude (§ 4) by showing that Spinoza provides different solutions to both these issues in his later version of the *Ethics*.

2 The Problem of Instantaneous Essences

Van Blijenbergh begins his correspondence by asking for clarifications about some points of Spinoza's *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, published in Latin in 1663 and translated into Dutch in 1664. The starting point of van Blijenbergh's discussion concerns the way in which divine *concursum* can be accommodated with human actions that seem to violate God's orders.¹⁰ As van Blijenbergh explains:

God is not only the cause of the substance of the mind but also of every striving or motion of the mind, which we call the will, as you everywhere maintain. From this statement it also seems to follow necessarily either that there is no evil in the motion or will of the soul or that God himself is the immediate agent of that evil. For those things that we call evil also come about through the soul, and consequently through this kind of immediate influence and concurrence of God. For example, the soul of Adam wants to eat of the forbidden fruit. According to the above statements, it is through God's influence that not only does Adam will, but also [...] that he wills thus. So either Adam's forbidden act, insofar as God not only moved his will but also insofar as he moved it in a particular way, is not evil in itself, or else God himself seems to bring about what we call evil. (Ep18: 806, G IV: 82f.)

¹⁰ Descartes has two answers to such a challenge. The first is a general profession of agnosticism concerning the way in which God's *concursum* can be compatible with human freedom (*Principles*, I, arts. 40–44). However, in the fourth *Meditation*, Descartes also explains that God can be exempted from any responsibility concerning human errors. Descartes defines error as a *privation* concerning the right use of free will that a subject should exercise by limiting the assent of his will to the ideas he clearly and distinctly perceives (CSM2: 40f.). Because God does not participate in the subject's error at all, “when [error] is referred to God as its cause, it should be called not a privation but simply a negation” (CSM2: 42).

Van Blijenbergh plainly recognizes that in Spinoza's view, "God is not only the cause of the substance of the mind but also of every striving or motion of the mind". In other words, God's *concursus* is not limited to sustaining substances but extends also to their modifications. Spinoza surely insists on this point.¹¹ Nevertheless, as van Blijenbergh rightly notices, such a commitment makes the problem of God's involvement in evil much stronger.

In PPC1, p15s, Spinoza explained error along Cartesian lines: error is not something real but must be understood as a "privation", that is, the lack of a more perfect state that the subject would have maintained by making better use of his free will and suspending his judgment to face obscure and confused ideas. Nonetheless, in his letter to van Blijenbergh, Spinoza drops any reference to the Cartesian freedom to suspend judgment and substitutes for it a necessary link between the perfection of the actions produced by a thing and the perfection of its own essence. Discussing Adam's sin, Spinoza explains:

[W]e know that whatever is, when considered in itself without regard to anything else, possesses a perfection coextensive in every case with the thing's essence; indeed the essence is nothing else than this perfection¹². I take as an example Adam's resolve or determinate will to eat of the forbidden fruit. This resolve or determinate will, considered solely in itself, contains in itself perfection to the degree that it expresses reality. This can be inferred from the fact that we cannot conceive imperfection in things except by having regard to other things possessing more reality. [...] Therefore Adam's will or decision, regarded in itself, was neither evil nor yet, properly speaking, against God's will, it follows that God can be [...] the cause of it. But not insofar as it was evil, for the evil that was in it was simply the privation of a more perfect state which Adam was bound to lose because of his action. (Ep19: 808 f.; G IV: 89)

11 Spinoza's reinterpretation of Descartes' *concursus* is offered in PPC1, P12, which is followed by four corollaries. Several passages from CM should be added to these texts, such as the following: "no created thing affects anything by its own force, just as no created thing began to exist by its own force" (CM1, 3: 184; G I: 242). More explicitly, Spinoza says: "we have demonstrated that things never have any power from themselves to affect anything or to determine themselves to any action" (CM2, 11: 207; G I: 273). These claims are exploited in KV2, 16, §4 footnote, 81f. (Spinoza 2009, 334), to dismiss the freedom of the will.

12 I correct the English translation (Spinoza 2002) "for its essence is not the same thing", which is misleading. The Latin translation says "nam essentiam etiam nihil aliud est", adding the term "essence" to the original Dutch text "want het ook niet anders is". However, it is clear from the previous sentence that Spinoza is arguing that the essence of a thing is *nothing but* its perfection.

Spinoza states that “whatever is [...] possesses a perfection coextensive in every case with the thing’s essence”.¹³ The essence of a thing defines what the thing is and what it can do.¹⁴ We have to understand “perfection” as the contrary of “privation”, namely, the fact that the thing does not lack any property or action that should pertain to it according to its essence. By considering perfection coextensive with essence, Spinoza indicates that things always exist in the way prescribed by their essence. If a thing fails to instantiate some property or action, this is because its essence does not imply such a property or action.

Nonetheless, we might want to distinguish between the perfection of the thing’s action and the perfection of its essence in order to hold that changes in the action’s perfection do not affect the essence’s perfection. In this way, for instance, we could admit that the perfection of Adam’s action decreases while the perfection of Adam’s essence remains unchanged. Although such a distinction between the perfection of the thing’s essence and perfection of its action sounds plausible, Spinoza’s discussion in 1665 does not support it.

If we consider the perfection of Adam’s action as something that does not depend on the perfection of Adam’s essence, then we must grant that Adam’s action counts as a thing in itself. According to Spinoza, Adam’s action expresses a perfection coextensive with an essence; if we assume that the perfection of Adam’s action does not depend on the perfection of Adam’s essence, then the perfection of Adam’s action must express another essence, namely, that of Adam’s action itself. In other words, we must consider Adam’s action as having its own essence. However, Spinoza states that an essence “contains in itself perfection to the degree that it expresses reality”. The essence of Adam’s action expresses reality only insofar as it refers to Adam. Should Adam’s action express a reality independent from Adam himself, such an action would have the same kind of reality as “real accidents” or “substantial forms” admitted by scholastics. Spinoza expressly says in the *Metaphysical Thought* added to the PPC that “things of this type [i.e. substantial forms and real accidents] are plainly absurd” (CM2, 1, 189). Therefore, the perfection of Adam’s action must depend on the thing that makes Adam’s action exist, that is, Adam himself and his own essence. Accordingly, the perfection of Adam’s action cannot be separated from (rather, it is coexten-

¹³ Spinoza presents a similar claim in KV1, 9, 60 (Spinoza 2009, 254): “if good and evil are things or actions, then they must have their definitions. But good and evil (as, for example, the goodness of Peter and the wickedness of Judas) have no definitions apart from the essence of Judas or Peter because this alone exists in Nature, and they cannot be defined without their essence. Therefore, as stated above – it follows that good and evil are not things or actions which exist in Nature”.

¹⁴ Cf. KV2, Pref, 62 (Spinoza 2009, 262); E2def2 and 7; E3def1 f.

sive with) the perfection of his essence. In this sense, Spinoza writes that “*Adam* [himself] was bound to lose [his previous perfection] because of his action”.

Spinoza’s initial reply to van Blijenbergh consists in observing that Adam’s essence is always perfectly realized because at each moment Adam’s action expresses exactly the perfection of his essence at that moment. We consider Adam’s action a sin only because we compare two different actions of Adam in two different moments of time. According to Spinoza, this comparison exists only in our mind and not in Adam himself. This implies that God does concur with Adam’s action, by decreeing that Adam’s essence will be such and such, because Adam’s action is something real. Nonetheless, God is not responsible for the “imperfection” ascribed to such an action because this imperfection does not express anything real in Adam but results only from a comparison made by our own mind between Adam’s different states. A comparison remains nothing but an “entity of reason” (“*ens rationis*”), namely, it is not a real entity, and thus God does not concur with it.¹⁵

This solution, however, leaves Spinoza with a problem perhaps even more difficult than that of evil. As van Blijenbergh points out:

[I]f the actions I produce can be no greater or lesser than the essence I have received, it cannot be imagined that there is a privation of a more perfect state. If nothing comes to pass contrary to God’s will, and if what comes to pass is governed by the amount of essence granted, in what conceivable way can there be evil, which you call privation of a better state? How can anyone suffer the loss of a more perfect state through an act thus constituted and dependent? Thus it seems to me that you must maintain one of two alternatives: either that there is some evil, or, if not, that there can be no privation of a better state. For that there is no evil, and that there is privation of a better state, seem to be contradictory. (Ep20: 812; G IV: 100)

Spinoza’s equation between essence and perfection makes problematic how to conceive of the passage between different degrees of perfection. Indeed, the “privation of a more perfect state” refers to the fact that Adam’s essence has the property *p* at the moment *t*₁ but not at the moment *t*₂. We know that there must be a necessary connection between Adam’s essence at *t*₁ and Adam’s action at *t*₁. This implies that Adam’s essence at *t*₂ is not simply *deprived* of *p*. Indeed, insofar as *p* necessarily belongs to Adam’s essence, *p* cannot be lost without changing Adam’s essence as well. If Adam at *t*₂ is such that *p* has nothing to do with his essence, this indicates that Adam’s essence at *t*₂ is *different* from Adam’s essence at *t*₁, that

¹⁵ Cf. Ep19: 809; G IV: 91. Concerning the fact that *entia rationis* do not express reality, see also CM1, 1: 178 f.; G I: 234 f.

is, that Adam has two different essences at t1 and t2. This is the reason why Adam at t2 is *not* Adam at t1, that is, Adam at t2 is the *negation* of Adam at t1. However, this conclusion means that Adam is not “deprived of a better state” because at t2 he has simply a different essence that is *not* the same essence he had at t1. Consequently, *privation* has to be considered as a mere “entity of reason” in the sense that, beyond the comparison produced by our mind, it does not express anything real. Adam’s essence does not undergo any real transition between different degrees of perfection. These degrees correspond to different essences rather than to different ways to instantiate the same essence.¹⁶

The trouble with such a position concerns the identity of the thing. Insofar as the thing is supposed to remain the same, its essence should persist unchanged as well. This identity might be easily maintained, as Descartes did, by ascribing the imperfection to a free misuse of a faculty, which does not affect the essence of the thing. This would amount to saying that the action’s perfection might decrease without affecting the essence’s perfection. Spinoza cannot use such an argument because he simply rejected Descartes’ account of freedom by linking the perfection with the necessary expression of the thing’s essence. Accordingly, he seems bound to admit that if the thing’s perfection changes, its essence must change as well.¹⁷

Van Blijenbergh is right in pointing out that Spinoza has to face a dilemma. On the one hand, Spinoza might maintain that the thing’s essence does not change and necessarily produces the same effects always, but in this case there cannot be any “privation of a better state”. On the other hand, Spinoza could also argue that the privation of a better state indicates a change in the thing. Yet, he has to avoid conceding that this change amounts to a real action to which God could participate. Such a change should be reduced to a comparison between Adam’s essence *before* and *after* the fall. But then, it should be assumed that Adam has two different essences in these two moments of time.

This objection pushes Spinoza to reduce transitions in perfection to mere “negations”, that is, something that never expresses what really pertains to the nature of a thing. As he argues:

¹⁶ Prior to his correspondence with van Blijenbergh, Spinoza never discusses how the *same* entity can change its own perfection through different moments of time. Van Blijenbergh insists on this point in Ep20: 813; G IV: 102.

¹⁷ It should be stressed that Spinoza’s position (as it is stated in Ep19) entails that *whatever* changes the perfection of Adam’s action, will also change Adam’s essence. From this point of view, the fact that Adam acts alone or his actions are determined by external causes does not change the result.

[P]rivation is not an act of depriving; it is nothing more than simply a state of want, which in itself is nothing. [...] When we consider the nature of a man who is governed by a lustful desire and we compare his present desire with the desire of a good man, or with the desire he himself once had, we assert that this man is deprived of the better desire, judging that a virtuous desire belonged to him at that point of time. This we cannot do if we have regard to the nature of the decree and intellect of God. For from that perspective the better desire pertains to that man's nature at that point of time no more than to the nature of the Devil or a stone. Therefore from that perspective the better desire is not a privation but a negation. So privation is simply to deny of a thing something that we judge pertains to its nature, and *negation is to deny something of a thing because it does not pertain to its nature*. (Ep21: 824; G IV: 128, emphasis added)

Spinoza invokes God's standpoint to show that what we consider a privation is actually a true negation concerning the thing's essence.¹⁸ For instance, when a subject misuses his will, he *could not* do otherwise because his action is nothing but the necessary consequence of his essence. Hence, this loss of perfection is not only a *negation* referring to God – because God does not directly produce it as such – but also referring to the thing itself because the thing's action at that moment perfectly expresses the thing's essence at that same moment, and nothing more or less pertains to it.

The perfection Adam had in the Garden of Eden no longer belongs to him after his fall. In this sense, that past perfection is a “negation” concerning Adam's essence after the fall. The necessary connection established by Spinoza between the essence's perfection and the action's perfection implies that a different degree of perfection in Adam's action expresses a different degree of perfection in his essence. Irrespective of how external causes can influence Adam's action in different moments in time, Spinoza's position entails that if a thing no longer expresses the same perfection in a certain moment, it is because its essence no longer expresses that perfection either. Because perfection is coextensive with the essence of a thing (i.e. “the essence is nothing else than this perfection”, Ep19: 808), a change in perfection implies a change in essence. In this sense, Adam's previous perfection is a negation with respect to his essence after the fall

¹⁸ According to Descartes, privation is *also* the act of depriving because when the subject misuses his will, he deprives himself of a better condition, which he *could* have maintained by refraining from using his will beyond the limits of his intellect (see CSM2: 42: “the privation, I say, lies in the operation of the will in so far as it proceeds from me”). Spinoza rejects this possibility a few lines below the passage just quoted (Ep21: 824; G IV: 128). Jaquet 2009 has emphasized Spinoza's dismissal of Descartes' appeal to God's absolute power as a way to reinforce the account of error in terms of *negation* rather than of simple *privation*.

because it no longer pertains to his essence, namely, Adam's essence is no longer the same.

As van Blijenbergh straightforwardly resumes, “nothing else pertains to an essence than that which it possesses at the moment it is perceived” (Ep22: 829; G IV: 137). This position, as noted, undermines both the reality of transitions between different states of perfection – which Spinoza reduces to mere negations – and the same identity of the thing throughout time, because the thing's essence is different in different moments. Not only is Adam's sin not a sin – because evil does not exist – but Adam himself is not the same before and after his fall.

3 Spinoza's Ethical Intellectualism

In Spinoza's discussion with van Blijenbergh there is also a second argumentative thread that is more linked with the problem of how to interpret Holy Scripture. Despite the fact that Spinoza himself raises this problem first, it turns out to be no less troubling.¹⁹ The main assumption in Spinoza's discussion concerns what I will call “ethical intellectualism”. Indeed, he firmly maintains – reproducing a position already put forward in the KV²⁰ – that only adequate knowledge, considered as such or *per se*, can lead to beatitude. Because passions are essentially inadequate forms of knowledge, they can be contrasted only through adequate knowledge. In other words, the problem of reaching the supreme good can be resolved only by improving the adequacy of our knowledge.

¹⁹ Descartes expressly states in *Principles*, I, 76, that, from a general point of view, reason should be submitted to divine authority in case of a contrast between the two. However, in certain matters (such as natural philosophy), it is highly improbable that such a contrast arises because its object of inquiry is different from that of theology. In PPC2, p13s, Spinoza repeats an analogous claim by arguing that theology and natural philosophy should not be confounded. In CM2, 8 (and then in Ep21), he reinforces this position by stating that because the truth cannot contradict the truth, no incompatibility can arise between reason and Scripture. Fraenkel 2012 has extensively discussed this commitment.

²⁰ In KV2 Spinoza defines all the affects in terms of knowledge, by concluding (KV2, 19, 17, 90 [Spinoza 2009, 364]): “Love, Hatred, Sorrow and other passions are produced in the soul in various forms according to the kind of knowledge which, from time to time, it happens to have of the thing”. Moreover, because Spinoza equates volitions with ideas (KV2, 16), he denies (contrary to Descartes) that the will might have any power whatsoever to oppose passions. Accordingly, the only true remedy against the passions is acquiring a more adequate form of knowledge (see KV2, 22).

Spinoza states that the love of God “flows from the knowledge of God, and by which alone, within the limits of our human intellect, we are said to be servants of God” (Ep19: 810; G IV: 94). Even more harshly, he states that “surely, he who refrains from [wrong]doing by fear of punishment [...] in no way acts from love and by no means embraces virtue” (Ep21: 826; G IV: 131). As will be seen, this knowledge is a theoretic knowledge concerning eternal and scientific truths, while moral practice can be nothing but a consequence of such knowledge.

The issue raised by van Blijenbergh concerns the sufficiency of the above account to explain the force with which imagination apparently resists adequate knowledge.²¹ In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and in the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza explains error in terms of the *partiality* of our ideas.²² As restated in PPC1, p15, falsity does not imply anything materially false but merely the privation of a more complete knowledge. Moreover, Spinoza firmly maintains that we have an innate and adequate idea of God through which God immediately manifests in our minds.²³ Thanks to this idea, it is possible to deduce a complete and satisfactory system of adequate knowledge.²⁴ Spinoza does not deny that we can have plenty of inadequate ideas. However, he maintains that the adequate knowledge of God’s idea is all that is needed to contrast passions and attain beatitude. In this sense, reaching the ethical goal (i.e. beatitude and salvation from passions) is even easier than reaching the more ambitious scientific goal (i.e. to build a system of adequate knowledge). Even if these assumptions are already presented in Spinoza’s early writings, he will be forced to test their coherence in replying to van Blijenbergh.

Spinoza himself feels compelled to explain why God forbade Adam to eat of the tree, if God knew that Adam would eat anyway. Spinoza argues:

21 In Sangiacomo 2012 I have discussed the insufficiency of Spinoza’s account of imagination in the TIE. Indeed, the mechanism of imagination and its power to contrast adequate ideas remains unexplained in Spinoza’s early works. Spinoza links the origin of imagination with some kind of bodily influence upon the mind (TIE § 84 f.), but he does not explain how or why the body has the power to prevent the mind from following the order of the intellect. From this point of view, even the KV does not provide consistent new answers to such a problem.

22 See TIE, § 73; KV2, 15 and 2, 16, § 7.

23 See TIE, § 33; KV1, 1 and 2, 24, §§ 10 f., 98 (Spinoza 2009, 390–392): “we consider it, therefore, impossible that God should make himself known to men by means of external signs. And we consider it to be unnecessary that it should happen through any other thing than the mere essence of God and the understanding of man”.

24 See TIE, §§ 37–39 and §§ 63–65. See also KV1, 7.

I say that Scripture, being particularly adapted to the needs of the common people, continually speaks in merely human fashion, for the common people are incapable of understanding higher things. That is why I think that all that God has revealed to the Prophets as necessary for salvation is set down in the form of law, and in this way the Prophets made up a whole parable depicting God as a king and lawgiver, because he had revealed the means that led to salvation and perdition, and was the cause thereof. These means, which are simply causes, they called laws, and wrote them down in the form of laws; salvation and perdition, which are simply effects necessarily resulting from these means, they represented as reward and punishment. All their words were adjusted to the framework of this parable rather than to truth. [...] Therefore the command given to Adam consisted solely in this, that God revealed to Adam that eating of that tree brought about death, in the same way that he also reveals to us through our natural understanding that poison is deadly. (Ep19: 809 f.; G IV: 92 f.)

God's revelation consists in an intellectual knowledge of a certain implication between causes and effects. For instance, God reveals to Adam, as an eternal truth: "if you eat of that tree, you will necessarily die". However, Scripture does not present this revelation in such a form, but instead translates it into a law, according to which "God forbids eating of that tree, and if you disobey you will die". Two fundamental shifts take place between these two formulations.

First, the law corresponding to God's original revelation does not conserve the necessary connection between cause and effect. For instance, it is not the eating itself that will cause death, but rather he who decides to transgress God's commandment will be punished with death. Thus, when God's revelation is reformulated in terms of law, it loses its adequateness in terms of knowledge, not only concerning the *form* – because God is represented as a lawgiver – but also concerning the content – the necessary connection between cause and effect. More properly, the *formal* inadequacy of the law is a consequence of the inadequacy of its content. Indeed, it is because the necessary connection between cause and effect is lost that men have to reformulate a connection between different elements by appealing to God's authority, which must now be presented as that of an anthropomorphic lawgiver.²⁵

²⁵ In TTP4, 9, Spinoza maintains a similar interpretation of God's revelation to Adam. Moreover, in TTP2, 14, Spinoza expressly acknowledges that God's revelation was accommodated to the intellectual capacity of Adam and the prophets, and it was thus often distorted. However, in TTP Spinoza also argues that God's revelation, as testified by the Scripture, does not concern eternal truths but rather it provides a way of conduct or a model for life. This is the reason why he can demonstrate (TTP14, 8) that God's Golden Rule can be obeyed even by following dogmas that are *pious* but not *true*. For an exhaustive discussion of Adam's role in Spinoza's philosophy and hermeneutics, see Mignini 2009, who has rightly emphasized Spinoza's insistence on the imperfect nature of Adam even before his fall.

Second, in this translation, God's revelation is no longer the apprehension of an eternal truth concerning causal connections, but it becomes a moral law concerning the punishments and rewards for certain actions. The subject who receives God's revelation in terms of law does not focus on the content of such revelation – which is not understood clearly and distinctly – but rather on the kind of behaviour God seems to demand. Because God seems to forbid something, it might appear that it should be possible, from an ontological point of view, to do the forbidden action. This is evidently an inadequate apprehension of God's revelation, but it is feasible that inadequate ideas were at the core of Adam's hybris to eat of the tree.

The crucial point is that such inadequate ideas are not accidental but follow necessarily from the inadequate apprehension of God's revelation. From an inadequate starting point, nothing other than inadequate ideas can follow.²⁶ Because Spinoza maintains that the supreme good is nothing but adequate intellectual knowledge, it must also follow that God's revelation, understood inadequately in terms of moral law, cannot lead to any adequate knowledge, and thus neither to beatitude nor salvation.

This leads to the problem of whether Adam and the prophets understood *adequately* God's revelation – that is, in terms of eternal truths – and simply reshaped it in imaginative and inadequate terms, or rather if they were the first to miss the adequate intellectual apprehension of God's revelation. Both these alternatives have heavy implications for Spinoza's position, as van Blijenbergh points out:

[I]f God has revealed his Word and his will to men, then he has done so for a definite purpose, and clearly. Now if the prophets have composed a parable out of the Word which they received, then God must either have willed this, or not willed it. If God willed that they should compose a parable out of his Word, that is, that they should depart from his meaning, God would be the cause of that error and would have willed something self-contradictory. If God did not will it, it would have been impossible for the prophets to compose a parable therefrom. Moreover, it seems likely, on the supposition that God gave his Word to the prophets, that he gave it in such a way that they did not err in receiving it. For God must have had a definite purpose in revealing his Word; but his purpose could not have been to lead men into error, thereby, for that would be a contradiction in God. (Ep20: 819; G IV: 118f.)

Once again, van Blijenbergh seems perfectly right in observing that if we suppose that God reveals something to men – as Spinoza himself does not deny at all – “he gave it in such a way that they did not err in receiving it”. However, conceding

²⁶ See TIE § 61 and E2p36.

this point would lead Spinoza to disastrous conclusions. Concerning Adam, for instance, Spinoza's explanation of his sin works only insofar as we admit that Adam *lacks* adequate knowledge. Indeed, Spinoza grants that from adequate knowledge virtue necessarily follows, and because the will is not different from the intellect (KV2, 16), it would be impossible for Adam to err given an adequate idea of God's revelation. Concerning the prophets, the consequences of such assumption would be even worse, namely, either the prophets actually conveyed the true adequate revelation received from God or they transformed it. In the first case, Holy Scripture must be taken literally, and the anthropomorphic image of God should be considered part of the revelation. In the second case, the prophets would have transformed adequate knowledge into inadequate knowledge, which they should acknowledge – supposing they know God's true intellectual revelation – as unable to lead to true virtue. Because both these options are evidently unacceptable, Spinoza has to maintain that Adam and the prophets did not grasp God's revelation adequately. However, it is not clear at all *why* they could not grasp such revelation adequately.

In Spinoza's harsh answer to van Blijenbergh, he writes: “if it is your conviction that God speaks more clearly and effectually through Holy Scripture than through *the light of the natural understanding which he has also granted us and maintains strong and uncorrupted through his divine wisdom*, you have good reason to adapt your understanding to the opinions which you ascribe to Holy Scripture” (Ep21: 822; G IV: 126, emphasis added). However, the problem does not concern how we common people receive God's revelation – namely, through reason or Holy Scripture – but how the *prophets* received it. It seems reasonable to presuppose that even if God's revelation to the prophets would be produced through imagination – which would imply that God did not reveal himself adequately from the beginning – this revelation could not eliminate the natural revelation produced through the “natural understanding which he has also granted us and maintains strong and uncorrupted through his divine wisdom”. After all, even if it can be a matter of discussion whether or not the prophets were accomplished philosophers, it seems out of the question that they were completely devoid of intellect. Adam and the prophets, like all other humans, should have an adequate and innate idea of God.

If the prophets had access to natural revelation, why did they not grasp an adequate knowledge of God? This problem does not concern only the eventual imperfection of prophetic revelation, but rather the status of natural revelation and its power to lead to salvation. Inadequate or imaginative ideas are nothing but incomplete ideas in which there is nothing positive (PPC1, p15). Moreover, Spinoza firmly maintains that adequate ideas are all that is needed to contrast inadequate ideas. According to Spinoza's *early* epistemology, we should expect

that the simple presence of adequate ideas should be sufficient to correct **the inadequacy** and emend the mind. Nonetheless, the case provided by Adam and the prophets offers an interesting and factual counterexample to this point.²⁷ Spinoza's interpretation of Holy Scripture and his reading of Adam's sin imply that both Adam and the prophets completely lack an adequate idea of God despite the natural revelation provided by the ("uncorrupted") intellect. However, if inadequate knowledge contains nothing positive in itself, what is the source of such power with which imagination seems to contrast adequate knowledge?

In 1665, Spinoza did not provide a satisfying answer to this question. It is noteworthy that he could not hold in this context that the simple practice of virtue will lead to a more adequate knowledge about the reasons of this practice and then to salvation.²⁸ As we saw in the previous section, Spinoza is committed to the claim that "nothing else pertains to an essence than that which it possesses at the moment it is perceived". Accordingly, if someone inadequately perceives God's revelation in imaginative terms, and thus respects God's commandment to avoid the punishment rather than for true love of virtue, he is simply lacking true virtue and his essence is such that he cannot do otherwise. This kind of practice based on the imagination of God as lawgiver does not lead to a state any more perfect simply because Spinoza excludes the possibility that transitions from different states of perfection might be something real. Indeed, as Spinoza argued, any transition – that is, privation or increase of perfection – is nothing but a negation with respect both to God and to the thing's essence.

²⁷ Spinoza's mature epistemology will explain the power of the imagination to overcome adequate ideas through the connection between imaginative ideas and the *conatus* doctrine. See, on this point, § 4. It should be remarked that the problem stressed here does not derive simply from the claim that we have an innate idea of God, but rather from the combination of this claim with Spinoza's ethical intellectualism, according to which adequate knowledge is *sufficient* to contrast inadequate knowledge. Indeed, in such a view, error cannot have any force to contrast adequate ideas. Moreover, the subject does not have any kind of free will in order to affirm inadequate, instead of adequate, ideas.

²⁸ On this feedback mechanism, see Fraenkel 2012, 251–253 and Kisner 2008 and 2011. It is noteworthy that Spinoza's *Short Treatise* expressly rejected such feedback, cf. KV2, 26, § 2, 99 (Spinoza 2009, 396).

4 Transitions of Perfection and Ethical Intellectualism in the Ethics

In this last section, I would like to draw attention to how Spinoza's ontology in the *Ethics* significantly departs from the claims pointed out against van Blijenbergh. Specifically, in 1675, Spinoza (1) admitted the reality of transitions of perfection that were dismissed in 1665 as mere negations, and (2) redefined the relation between knowledge and beatitude by facing the shortcomings of the kind of "ethical intellectualism" embraced in his early writings. I will discuss these two points in turn.

(1) In 1665, Spinoza conceived of the relation between essence and perfection in such a way that every action that modifies the thing's perfection also implies a change in the thing's essence. In 1675, Spinoza provided an account of the relation between essence and perfection that allows transitions of perfection that do not amount to a transformation of the thing's essence. At the beginning of the third part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza demonstrates: "[T]he striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (E3p7: 159; G II: 146). The demonstration runs as follows:

From the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow (by IP36), and things are able [to produce] nothing but what follows necessarily from their determinate nature (by IP29). So the power of each thing, *or* the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, *or* strives to do anything – that is (by P6), the power, *or* striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, *or* actual, essence of the thing itself, q.e.d. (E3p7dem: 159; G II: 146)

The expression "actual essence" might puzzle the reader. Spinoza often uses "actual" in conjunction with "existence" to stress the existence of the body as it exists in duration.²⁹ Because the adjective "given" (*data*) has the same meaning, it seems safe to conclude that "actual essence" refers to the way in which a certain essence exists in a given time and place.³⁰ The essence of a finite thing does not

²⁹ See E2p11; 3p11s; 3 General Definition of Affects, expl.; 4p4dem; 4p21dem, 4p23dem and S; 5p29 and S.

³⁰ In E5p29s: 258; G II: 298f., Spinoza explains that "we conceive things as actual [*actuales concipiuntur*] in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature". In E2p8: 120; G II: 90, Spinoza argues that "formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes". Insofar as formal essences are inscribed in God's attributes, they must be as eternal and unchangeable as God's attributes. Accordingly,

involve existence (E1p24), but only the thing's "true definition" (E1p8s), namely, the essential properties that define its nature. E3p7 affirms that when the thing's essence exists as "given or actual" in a certain time and place, it always exists as a "striving" or *conatus* to bring about specific effects, that is, those effects that follow necessarily from the thing's "determinate nature".

In the demonstration, Spinoza takes as equivalent the thing's striving and its power of acting (*potentia sive conatus*)³¹. Although both these terms refer to the thing's essence insofar as it exists as "actual or given", Spinoza systematically uses either "striving" or "power" in order to stress two distinct aspects of the thing's "actual essence". While the thing's "striving" expresses its effort to bring about effects "as far as it can by its own power" (*quatenus in se est*, E3p6), the power of acting always refers to the way in which the thing's *conatus* is affected by external causes.

Spinoza stipulates that "the human body can be affected in many ways in which its power of acting [*agendi potentia*] is increased or diminished, and also in others which render its power of acting neither greater nor less" (E3Post1: 154; G II: 139). Depending on the extent to which external causes agree in nature with the thing itself, or have a nature contrary to it,³² they can oppose or aid the thing's *conatus* to bring about those effects that "follow necessarily from its determinate nature" (E3p7dem). In this way, external causes can increase or diminish the thing's power of acting. The introduction of a "power of acting" in the *Ethics* implies three major adjustments with respect to Spinoza's early views.

First, Spinoza still holds a necessary link between the thing's essence and the effects it can produce. Properly speaking, we produce an action "when some-

formal essences have a reality (and perfection) independent of whether, how and when they exist as "actual essences" *sub specie durationis* (E2p8s and E5p29s). The adjective "formal" in E2p8 should be understood in opposition to "objective". "Objective" refers to a scholastic jargon already used by Descartes (and by Spinoza himself, TIE §§ 33–35) to express the way in which something is present in the mind. On the contrary, "formal" refers to the reality of the thing itself. In this sense, "formal essences" are essences as they are eternally contained in God and not just ideas of them. Garrett 2009 has inferred from the fact that formal essences are eternal that they should be essences of *infinite* modes because finite modes have a limited existence. However, in Spinoza's view "eternity" does not refer to an infinite duration (which can be ascribed only to infinite modes) but rather to a necessary existence (that can be ascribed also to finite things insofar as they follow from God's nature, E1p16, p26–29, E5p29s). Moreover, Garrett's reading seems at odds with the contexts of E2p8, in which Spinoza refers to *singular* and thus *finite* things.

³¹ The same equation will be reproduced, for instance, in E3p37dem; E3p55Cdem; E3 General definition of affects, expl.

³² Cf. for instance E4p29–35. This composition between the thing's power of acting and external causes is discussed at length by Sangiacomo 2013a, 151–187.

thing in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone” (E3def2: 154; G II: 139). The reference to “our nature” suggests that a thing can be properly active only insofar as it produces those effects that can be deduced from its essence or nature alone. The “power of acting” accounts for the extent to which the thing is successful in bringing about these actions during its existence and under the determination of certain external causes. Contrary to what happened in 1665, this implies that the thing’s (eternal) essence is not affected as such by the way in which the thing’s power of acting is modified. A change in the thing’s *conatus* does not affect the properties defined by the thing’s (eternal) essence and the specific actions that follow from its “determinate nature”, but only the thing’s power of bringing them about by interacting with certain external causes. By acting upon the thing, external causes do not establish which effects must follow from the thing’s determinate nature but rather to what extent the thing can be successful in producing them.³³

Second, Spinoza still maintains: “by reality and perfection I understand the same thing” (E2Def6: 116; G II: 85). Nonetheless, he also demonstrates that “the more perfection each thing has, the more it acts and the less it is acted on; and conversely, the more it acts, the more perfect it is” (E5p40: 263; G II: 306).³⁴ This implies that, in the *Ethics*, the thing’s perfection is coextensive with the thing’s reality; however, the reality of an existing thing is expressed by its actual essence, namely, by its *conatus* or power of acting. Hence, the perfection of an existing thing is coextensive with the thing’s power of acting. Because the power of acting depends on the thing’s interaction with external causes, the thing’s perfection varies depending on how the power of acting is affected by external causes.

Spinoza introduces the concept of “transition” (“*transitio*”) to express the causal event through which a thing passes to a higher or lower power of acting, i.e. to a higher or lower degree of perfection. The concept of transition does not appear with such a meaning in any of Spinoza’s writings prior to 1675. In the *Ethics*, however, it plays a crucial role in the theory of affects. Indeed, affects are defined as transitions to lower or higher degrees of perfection (e.g. E3AD2–3). As Spinoza explains:

I say a passage [*transitionem*]. For joy is not perfection itself. If a man were born with the perfection to which he passes, he would possess it without an affect of joy. This is clearer from the affect of sadness, which is the opposite of joy. For no one can deny that sadness consists in a passage to a lesser perfection, not in the lesser perfection itself, since a man

³³ Viljanen 2011, 125–149 has investigated in greater detail how the thing’s essence can remain unchanged while the thing’s power of acting varies in degrees.

³⁴ For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Marshall 2011.

cannot be saddened insofar as he participates in some perfection. Nor can we say that sadness consists in the privation of a greater perfection. For a privation is nothing, whereas the affect of sadness is an act, which can therefore be no other act than that of passing to a lesser perfection, that is, *an act by which man's power of acting is diminished or restrained* (see P11S). (E3AD3expl: 188; G II: 191)

Expressions such as “lesser perfection” or “privation” do not mean anything real insofar as they remain merely comparative terms. Nonetheless, Spinoza points out that “a passage to a lesser perfection” is an “act by which man’s power of acting is diminished or restrained”. This act is perfectly real insofar as it expresses the causal interaction through which the thing’s power of acting is decreased by certain external causes.³⁵ Insofar as a transition expresses “an act”, such a transition is no longer a negation that results from our mind comparing two different states. Rather, it refers to real causal relationships that modify the way in which a certain causal network influences the thing’s power of acting.³⁶

Spinoza himself explains that this account of the thing’s power of acting is intended to allow transitions in perfection that do not amount (*pace* what he himself established ten years before) to transformations of the thing’s essence:

[W]hen I say that someone passes [*transit*] from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect. Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished. (E4, Pref: 200; G II: 208)

35 Cf. also E3, General definition of the affects: 197; G II: 204: “this [idea], which constitutes the form of the affect, must indicate or express a constitution of the body (or of some part of it), which the body (or some part of it) has because its power of acting, or force of existing, is increased or diminished, aided or restrained when I say *a greater or lesser force of existing than before*, I do not understand that the mind compares its body’s present constitution with a past constitution, but that the idea which constitutes the form of the affect affirms of the body something which really involves more or less of reality than before”.

36 Viljanen 2011, 125–132, has interpreted Spinoza’s distinction between the eternal or formal essences and their way to exist along what he calls the “principle of perfect essence realization”. In this reading, the thing would be fully active only if it could bring about its effects without receiving any determination from external causes. Sévérac 2005, instead, has suggested a different reading, in which the thing’s activity does not presuppose the neutralization of external causes but relies upon what is common among the thing’s nature and the external causes to increase the thing’s power to act. I have provided further evidence to support this later reading in Sangiacomo 2013b.

The thing's perfection is no longer always coextensive with the perfection of the thing's essence as it is formally embedded in God's attributes, but rather with the way in which such an essence is instantiated in existence among external causes. Depending on how the thing composes its striving to act with the effects resulting from external causes, it passes (*transit*) between different degrees of power of acting or perfection. Nonetheless, these variations no longer imply that the thing "is changed from one essence, or form, to another".

Third, Spinoza reproduces the claim, already put forward in 1665, that "good" and "evil" are relative concepts that our mind produces most often through imagination (E1Ap) or sometimes through reason (E4, Pref; E4def1 f.; E4p27). However, Spinoza can now explain that what our mind judges as "good" or "evil" is nothing but our affects of joy or sadness (E4p8), which are in turn nothing but transitions to a higher or lower degree of perfection or power of acting. Van Blijenbergh provoked Spinoza to admit "either that there is some evil, or, if not, that there can be no privation of a better state" (Ep20: 812; G IV: 100). From the point of view of the *Ethics* such a dilemma vanishes. Spinoza can maintain that evil is "nothing positive in things, considered in themselves" (E4, Pref: 199; G II: 208) because "evil" is a relative concept resulting from a transition to a lower degree of perfection produced through interactions with external causes. Nonetheless, "evil" does express "a privation of a better state" insofar as it expresses the act through which external causes decrease the power of acting of the same thing.³⁷

(2) The possibility to allow transitions of perfection establishes feedback between practice and knowledge that leads Spinoza to significantly depart from the kind of ethical intellectualism presented in his early writings. Because the mind and the body are the same thing conceived under different attributes (E2p7s), Spinoza can state that the more the body is active the more the mind is able to think adequately and thus to behave under the guidance of reason (E5p39). It follows that an increase in the body's power of acting results in an increase in the mind's power of thinking adequately. This approach provides a completely new account of the power of imagination.

In the *Ethics*, imagination is presented as not only the lowest degree of knowledge and the origin of inadequate ideas (E2p40s2), but also as deeply linked with the power of the mind to represent to itself what it imagines is conducive to improve its own *conatus* (E3p12). The more the mind imagines that certain ideas are conducive to the improvement of its power, the more the mind *strives* to conceive of them. Insofar as ideas turn out to be deeply linked with the mind's *conatus*

37 For a fuller discussion concerning Spinoza's account of good and evil, see Scribano 2011.

tus,³⁸ external causes can improve the power of certain ideas instead of others. The more the external causes are powerful, the more the mind will be led to hold those ideas. The link between imagination and *conatus* leads to the rejection of two major aspects of the kind of ethical intellectualism that Spinoza embraced in 1665.

First, passions are no longer conceived of as forms of inadequate knowledge but are endowed with a force capable of opposing the *conatus* that supports adequate ideas. Accordingly, adequate knowledge appears in the *Ethics* as a necessary *but not sufficient* condition to practice virtue. In order to explain “the causes of man’s lack of power and inconstancy, and why men do not observe the precepts of reason” (E4p18s: 208; G II: 221), Spinoza demonstrates that “no affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered as an affect” (E4p14: 207; G II: 219) and, therefore, that “a desire which arises from a true knowledge of good and evil can be extinguished or restrained by many other desires which arise from affects by which we are tormented” (E4p15: 207; G II: 220).³⁹

Second, from the point of view of the *Ethics*, the shortcoming of the kind of ethical intellectualism embraced in 1665 consists in not realizing that knowledge itself can be effective only insofar as it is supported by affects able to lead the mind and body toward greater perfection. For instance, Spinoza maintains in his later *Ethics* that the love of God is our supreme good, as he did in the KV and in his correspondence with van Blijenbergh. However, he supports this claim with a rather different reason. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza equates the *conatus* with virtue itself (E4def8; E4p22), and he states that beatitude (or the intellectual love for God) is nothing but virtue. Moreover, he demonstrates that affects can be

38 In E2p48 f. Spinoza reiterates what he already pointed out in KV2, 16, against the distinction between the intellect and will. Any idea implies in itself not only a representation of an object but also an affirmation or negation of this object. Spinoza’s equation between ideas and affirmations provoked an interesting debate. According to Della Rocca 2003, ideas are affirmations because they depend on the *conatus* of the agent. Steinberg 2005 has contended, however, that it should be more appropriate to say that *every* idea has its own *conatus* or force to affirm itself against other ideas. For interesting developments concerning the link between the *conatus* doctrine and Spinoza’s account of ideas, see Lenz 2012 and 2013. Even if the link between ideas and *conatus* is highly plausible concerning the *Ethics*, it should be stressed that Spinoza equated affirmations and ideas (i.e. intellect and will) already in the *Short Treatise*, where he expressly considered the intellect a *passive* faculty (see KV2, 16, 7).

39 It should be noted that the *conatus* doctrine held in E3p6 f. is quoted both in E4p15dem and in E4p18dem. Both these demonstrations exploit E4p7, according to which “an affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained”. Spinoza makes reference to E3p12 in the demonstration of this proposition.

contrasted only by opposite affects (E4p7) and the desire (*cupiditas*) originated from affects that improve our power of acting is stronger than any other passion (E4p18). It follows that beatitude can contrast the power of passions (E5p42), because it embodies the most powerful active affect, namely, the intellectual love of God. What contrasts negative affects is no longer adequate knowledge as such, but rather the power that such knowledge expresses in mental terms.

Furthermore, when someone starts to behave correctly – even when driven by passions – if this behaviour leads to a real increase of power, his mind will increase its power of acting, namely, to think adequately. Accordingly, the more a certain practice is conducive to improve activity, the more the subject will find adequate reasons to behave in such a way, even if that behaviour is initially based more on affects excited by external causes than by adequate knowledge originally possessed by the subject. For our present discussion, it must be stressed that this account crucially relies on Spinoza's definition of affects as transitions between different degrees of our power of acting.

In the later *Ethics*, Spinoza links his account of beatitude with the *conatus* doctrine in a way that is completely missing from his early writings and in his replies to van Blijenbergh. In 1665, under the insistence of van Blijenbergh, Spinoza explained:

[B]y a righteous man I understand one who has a steadfast desire that each should possess his own, which desire I show in my *Ethics* (which I have not yet published) arises necessarily in the pious from the clear knowledge they have of themselves and of God. And since the thief has no such desire, he necessarily lacks the knowledge of God and of himself; that is, he lacks the principal thing that makes us men. (Ep23: 834; G IV: 151f.)

If we look carefully at what Spinoza affirms as having demonstrated in that *first draft*, we can find exactly what he had already argued in KV2, 16, 2 about *desire*, that is, the intellectualist claim that it is knowledge that determines desire and not the contrary. In this quote, indeed, Spinoza holds that we can desire to do something good only because we have adequate knowledge, and that if we have adequate knowledge we must desire to do something good. The claim that the right desire “arises *necessarily* in the pious from the clear knowledge they have of themselves and of God” means that adequate knowledge cannot fail to lead to virtuous desire. Here, virtuous desire is conceived as completely dependent on adequate knowledge and has nothing to do with the *conatus* power.

However, in the later version of the *Ethics*, Spinoza will argue for the contrary, that is, knowledge as such is *insufficient* for determining affects – desires included. This is because desire is an affect and affects can only be opposed by other affects (E4p7). As such, adequate knowledge still plays a crucial role, but only insofar as it is conducive towards more powerful affects (E5p20s). This later

position contrasts with the kind of ethical intellectualism sketched at the beginning of the previous section. Specifically, Spinoza's early rejection of transitions in power or perfection pairs with his endorsement of a kind of ethical intellectualism according to which only adequate knowledge as such can contrast affects. Not surprisingly, Spinoza's admission of such transitions pairs with his rejection of that kind of ethical intellectualism.

To conclude, both the notion of transition and the fact that adequate knowledge alone is insufficient to oppose the power of passions are deeply connected with Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine as it is presented in the later version of the *Ethics*. Moreover, the link between the *conatus* and imagination explains the power with which inadequate ideas and passions can contrast adequate ideas. However, Spinoza holds opposite views both in his correspondence with van Blijenbergh and in his explicit references to what he argues to have demonstrated in his *first draft* of the *Ethics*. Therefore, we must conclude that his *first draft* of the *Ethics* was rather different from its later version. In particular, in 1665 Spinoza's ontology still seems far from having developed at least two central aspects of his *conatus* doctrine. I stressed that the positions held in 1665 raised serious problems. The necessity to find a solution to them led Spinoza to significantly depart from his early views.⁴⁰

Spinoza's works:

CM *Metaphysical Thoughts*

CSM2 *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (vol. II) – *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. J. Cottingham/R. Stoothoff/D. Murdoch/A. Kenny, Cambridge, 1984.

E *Ethics*

Ep *Letter*

KV *Short Treatise*

PPC *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*

TIE *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*

TTP *Theological-Political Treatise*

AD *Definitions of affects*

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